Workers' Knowledge of their Pension Coverage: A Reevaluation

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Because employer-provided pensions represent an important source of income during retirement, accurate information on pension coverage would seem to be crucial for making sound decisions on retirement timing, saving and portfolio allocation. However, previous research suggests that workers' knowledge of their pension provisions is often incomplete or incorrect. This paper re-examines workers' knowledge of their pension coverage, using matched employer-employee data from the Federal Reserve Board's Survey of Consumer Finances. We find that, while most workers in our sample accurately reported the general features of their pension coverage, their knowledge of the detailed features was often fairly limited.

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I. Introduction

Employer provided pensions are important sources of income during retirement, constituting a substantial fraction of household wealth. The characteristics of households' pension plans affect many decisions — from how much to work and save to when to retire. In making sound decisions about retirement income adequacy, savings, and portfolio allocation, accurate information on the characteristics of pension plans would seem to be crucial. The purpose of this paper is to examine how much knowledge workers have about their pension plans by comparing reports provided by workers to their employers' reports.

The subject of workers' knowledge of their pension coverage is particularly interesting in view of the dramatic increase in the provision of 401(k)-type plans during the last 10-15 years. These plans require workers to decide whether to participate in the plan and in the case of participation, how much to contribute to the plan. Compared to traditional defined benefit pension plans, the choices in 401(k) plans put more responsibility on the worker to plan for his or her own retirement. At the same time, the growth of 401(k) plans has prompted employers to provide more information about pension plans, and there has been an increase in financial education programs in the workplace (EBRI 1996).

In previous research using the 1983 Survey of Consumer Finances, Mitchell (1988) found that workers were fairly misinformed about the characteristics of their pensions. Bernheim (1988) studied the accuracy of knowledge of expected Social Security benefits in a sample of workers close to retirement. He found that workers formed expectations using only part of the information available to them and that the accuracy of their expectations would have been improved if all available information was used. In related research, Bernheim (1994) used survey data on financial planning collected by financial institutions and found evidence that people's financial knowledge is generally limited.

This paper reevaluates the question of workers' knowledge of their pension coverage using the 1989 Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) linked with a Pension Provider Survey

(PPS). The SCF collects the households' reports on their pension coverage while the PPS provide information on these plans from the employer. The linked employer-employee data provide a unique opportunity to construct a measure of validation using information both from workers and their employers. In contrast to the perhaps more common method of sampling employers first, this is a household-based survey supplemented with information from the employers of individuals in these households.

The paper is organized as follows: The next section describes the data. The third section presents descriptive statistics comparing worker and employer reports on several dimensions of pension plans such as type of plan, contribution rates, early retirement options and normal retirement age. In the fourth section of the paper we examine whether there are systematic differences across workers using a multivariate framework. The paper concludes with a discussion.

II. Data

The data used in this study come from the 1989 Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) linked with a supplemental Pension Provider Survey (PPS). The SCF is a triennial survey sponsored by the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System in cooperation with the Statistics of Income Division at the Department of the Treasury. The most recent Pension Provider Survey was collected in 1989 — the high cost of collecting and coding the information has prohibited collection for more recent surveys.

The Survey of Consumer Finances. The purpose of the SCF is to provide information on the financial characteristics of U.S. households. To this end, the SCF collects very detailed information on households' assets, liabilities and demographic characteristics. The interviews for the SCF are conducted in person and are generally conducted with the financially most knowledgeable member of the household. Respondents are encouraged to consult records, and 30 to 40 percent do. The SCF utilizes a dual-frame sample. The first part consists of a standard multi-stage area probability sample, drawn from a file based on Census records. The second part of the sample is a "list sample" drawn from a special file of tax records. From this list, units are selected at disproportionate rates, with the sampling rate